



*State Representative* **Val Ogden**



## *A Report to the 49th Legislative District*

May 1997

Dear Friends and Neighbors:

State lawmakers recently adjourned the 1997 Legislative Session, completing action on a wide variety of important issues.

The only constitutionally mandated requirement of the Legislature was the adoption of a budget for the upcoming two years. But we also enacted welfare reform, rewrote our juvenile-justice laws, established a permanent ban on oil drilling off our coast, and acted to let the voters decide whether the state should build a new stadium for the Seattle Seahawks.

As the ranking Democrat on the Capital Budget Committee, I was very pleased to have been able to impact the final appropriation for construction projects. Specifically, I was able to get an additional \$4.7 million for the Housing Trust Fund, bringing its total appropriation to \$54.7 million for the next two years. This important fund provides grants and loans to local governments and nonprofit organizations for the purpose of creating low-income housing.

I was also pleased to have been able to preserve the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program at a funding level of \$45 million. The program provides for the acquisition and development of parks and wildlife habitat. Both the City of Vancouver and Clark County have a number of projects dependent on funding from the program. Finally, I was able to get \$2.7 million restored to the Social Services Facility Program, which provides grants to low-income, community-based family service organizations to assist in acquiring and refurbishing buildings. Having initiated the program in the Legislature, I am particularly pleased to know that the Clark County YWCA will be one of those eligible to apply for these important funds.

Several of the bills which I sponsored were enacted into law. One which was the product of a request from Clark County, will allow the county to improve roads and then get repaid once the adjoining land is developed. The other bill, a request from the City of Vancouver, the Vancouver Housing Authority, and downtown businesses, will allow tax credits for the development of low income housing.

Unfortunately, the Legislature also passed a number of very questionable bills that would weaken environmental protection, retreat from critical health-insurance reforms, and undercut retraining programs for displaced workers. Fortunately, the governor used his veto pen, protecting the interests of Washington citizens from many of these ill-conceived, and in some cases radical proposals.

I was also very disappointed with the failure of the Legislature to provide a meaningful cost-of-living adjustment for our hard-working state employees, teachers, and college personnel. I came to Olympia committed to improving conditions for Washington's working families. In many cases, I feel that I met that goal. In situations like the pay raise for state employees, I wish the outcome would have been more satisfying.

In my newsletter today, I have attempted to provide a brief review of some of these issues and other subjects of particular concern for our Vancouver area. If you have any questions about what you read, please don't hesitate to call or write. My Vancouver phone number, 254-3007, will connect you with my legislative assistant, Clareda Nikula. You can also use the toll-free legislative hotline at 1-800-562-6000 to leave a message. We will do our best to help you.

Thank you very much for taking the time to review this newsletter.

Sincerely,

*Val Ogden*  
Val Ogden

# A Report to the 49th Legislative District

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## **Gas-tax debate:** *a disappointing nonresult this year*

One of the biggest disappointments this year was the refusal of the Republican majority to provide leadership to raise the state's 23-cent-per-gallon gas tax. The gas tax was last raised in 1990, and the revenue goes to fund the maintenance of our local and state roads.

Since the gas tax isn't tied to inflation, it is producing less revenue every year. Further, we are receiving less transportation money from the federal government and our automobiles are much more fuel-efficient. So, you can see that we have much less money to use for highway-improvement projects

An inadequate investment in our roads and highways means that we'll be driving on increasingly crowded roads — many of which are badly in need of repair.

The economic consequences are also a major concern because the swift and efficient movement of cargo is essential. Washington ports currently enjoy an advantage over our California rivals because we're a day or so closer to Asian ports. But business leaders report that our advantage is threatened because the roads are so congested.

The Legislature approved a \$3.2-billion transportation budget for the next two years, a slight reduction from the current level of funding. This will require some cuts in the maintenance of existing roads, and very little money for new projects needed to cope with population growth. The Mill Plain Extension, for example, is a \$13 million project that received only \$3.8 million. While the lack of adequate funding doesn't threaten the eventual completion of the project, it will take longer to become reality. The transportation budget does include money for a performance review of the Department of Transportation and I will serve on the oversight committee for that review.

No one wants to pay higher taxes at the gas pump, but building and maintaining roads is expensive — and vital. The inadequate investment in our transportation infrastructure is a disappointing nonresult of this year's session.

## **Basic Health Plan** *slightly expanded for low-income citizens*

The Legislature established the Basic Health Plan (BHP) in 1987 to provide affordable, subsidized health insurance for low-income working families — the citizens who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford insurance. The program has been a success. More than 130,000 individuals have enrolled, but an additional 70,000 applicants are on a waiting list and an estimated 600,000 Washingtonians are still uninsured.



Alaina Munson, a 9th grader at Hudson's Bay High School, served as a legislative page during the 1997 session. Other Vancouver area pages sponsored by Rep. Ogden were Caroline Ega, Justin Salisbury, and Evan Nelson.

In 1995, the legislative majority voted to repeal much of the health-care-reform legislation enacted just two years earlier. At that time we were promised there would be sufficient funding to enable the enrollment of 200,000 individuals in the BHP by 1997. Unfortu-

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nately, that didn't happen, instead a budget proposal was adopted that would have provided no additional BHP enrollees.

The governor had proposed the addition of 20,000 enrollees in his initial budget plan, and he vetoed the Republican proposal. Eventually, a compromise agreement was adopted to permit the enrollment of an additional 8,000 citizens.

The sad fact remains that hundreds of thousands of Washington residents will continue to be uninsured because the BHP remains closed to them. As a group, the uninsured tend to forego regular medical care, delaying treatment until the need is so great that they must turn to extremely expensive treatment in an emergency room. Because most of these people cannot afford such expensive care, the bill must be paid by everyone else.

While the health-care crisis is not getting the attention it received a few years ago, the problems remain — and continue to impact everyone in Washington.

## *Staying the course on the work to improve our schools*

We passed a sweeping education-reform plan four years ago, a plan that seeks to hold schools and students accountable for learning. Instead of either simply following regulations or sitting through the required number of classes, schools and students must demonstrate genuine learning progress. While public-opinion surveys indicate strong support for these reform efforts, a vocal minority is determined to stop the movement toward higher academic standards.

Democrats worked with reform-minded Republicans to successfully fight attempts to lower student-achievement standards. We also succeeded in preserving the Certificate of Mastery as a requirement to receive a high-school diploma. This requirement means that students must master the skills and knowledge emphasized in the new standards. We were also able to preserve, with the help of the Governor, funds for Magnet Schools and the Complex Needs Program. Other programs, such as PIP and School to Work were not as fortunate.

## *Proposals involving working families:*

### *• Pay raise for public employees*

The failure of the Legislature to provide regular cost-of-living adjustments to state workers, public school teachers, and college and university personnel in recent years has had the effect of reducing the inflation-adjusted value of their salaries by 10% over the last four years. One of my greatest disappointments with this most recent legislative session was the decision to provide but a single three percent COLA for these workers over the next two years. By providing only half of the expected inflation for the period we are again undercutting the buying power of their salaries, ignoring their important contributions to the education of our young people and the efficient operation of government.

### *• Reductions to Workforce Training and Timber Retraining Benefits*

Earlier in the decade the Legislature created the Workforce Training and Timber Retraining Benefits (TRB) programs in response to the large unemployment in the state's timber and fisheries regions. Thousands of citizens have lost their jobs due to federal actions reducing the harvests in both industries. With little hope that either industry will ever again employ large numbers of workers, those who have lost their jobs need to be retrained if they are to again be able to support their families.

These programs have proven to be a lifeline for thousands. Specifically, TRB provides extended unemployment benefits to displaced workers enrolled in approved retraining programs. Without such benefits, these workers would most likely be forced to leave their communities or take jobs at salaries paying just a fraction of their previous earnings.

Workforce Training provides funding to community and technical colleges to ensure that they have training slots available to the displaced workers. The program also offers a range of financial assistance and job-placement services. The key is to offer retraining programs in good-paying occupations with real job openings.

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Thousands have benefitted from the two programs, with the overwhelming majority quickly finding jobs in their new occupations at wages equal or close to those they received in their previous occupations.

While few have disputed the effectiveness and efficiency of both programs, the Legislature bowed to the pressure from the state's business lobby to significantly downsize both programs. TRB will no longer be available to most impacted timber and fisheries workers, and the community and technical colleges will have far fewer slots available for retraining these workers.

## Local concerns:

- **WSU Vancouver Campus receives appropriation**

The Legislature appropriated an additional \$13.5 million for the second phase of the WSU Vancouver campus. The money will fund the design and

construction of two additional buildings here, as well as the infrastructure system for water and sewage. The package includes \$1 million for traffic mitigation on 134th Avenue.

- **Money provided for the O.O. Howard House and Pearson Airpark**

A state Heritage Project grant of \$345,000 has been authorized for the renovation of the O.O. Howard House on Officer's Row. The O.O. Howard House will be renovated as a museum and information center, and the City of Vancouver will provide the rest of the money necessary to complete the \$1.8 million project. Also in our area, Pearson Airpark receive a Heritage grant of \$9,659.

I was proud to help create the Heritage Project program two years ago to provide funding help for the restoration of historic sites around the state. The Legislature this year appropriated \$4.1 million for Heritage grants.

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Capital Budget, *Ranking Democrat*  
Transportation Policy & Budget  
Rules  
Pension Policy  
Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, *Secretary*

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